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SUBJECT: ERBIL: S/A KRAJESKI MEETS WITH ANGRY KRG LEADERS
PREPARING FOR CONFRONTATION WITH PM MALIKI

Classified By: Classified By: RRT Erbil Regional Coordinator Lucy Tamlyn for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) reporting cable.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: KRG officials are frustrated with the stagnation in the implementation of Article 140, dismayed about recent Iraqi Army attempted deployments into Khanqin and other disputed territories, and fearful for their future within a federal Iraq if the perceived anti-Kurd sentiment growing in Baghdad continues to strengthen. During an August 24-28 trip to Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulimaniyah, Senior Advisor Tom Krajieski met with KRG President Masu'd Barzani and other senior KRG officials, all three governors, NGO representatives, journalists, and representatives of minority groups. President Barzani complained bitterly about PM Maliki's growing power and ambition, and reiterated the KRG's close ties to and dependence on the USG for support and protection of their interests. NGO and journalists chafe under KRG rule, but Kurdish popular support for uniting Kirkuk and other disputed territories with the KRG remains very strong. Religious minority representatives acknowledged the improvements in their overall quality of life since the fall of Saddam's regime, but expressed a desire for unification of and increased decision-making authority for their (still disparate) communities. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Senior Advisor for Northern Iraq Thomas Krajieski, accompanied by POLOff Joseph Cassidy and POLMILOff David Howell, visited all three provinces of the KRG August 24-28. He met with senior-level officials of the regional and provincial government, political party leaders and religious minority groups. He also met with representatives of the independent media in Kurdistan Region. S/A Krajieski reiterated USG support for the implementation of Article 140, the USG's desire for the successful passage of the national Provincial Elections Law, the necessity of separating the Kirkuk issue from the passage of the law, and the desire of the USG for an equitable, peaceful and locally-generated resolution on the status of Kirkuk. S/A Krajieski also conveyed the USG desire for a reduction of military tensions in Khanqin district and increased diplomatic cooperation between the GOI and KRG on the political administration of the disputed areas.

GOI and KRG standoff in Khanqin at Risk of Escalation

¶3. (C) In August 27 meetings with KRG President Masu'd Barzani and KRG Chief of Intelligence Masrur Barzani, S/A Krajieski voiced USG concern about recent confrontations between the Iraqi Army and KRG Peshmerga forces in the Khanqin district of northern Diyala province. He said that the status of the disputed territories should be determined via political and diplomatic means, not through military escalation. Both the KRG President and the KRG Intel Chief responded by expressing grave concern over what they believed to be the overreaching of the GOI into Kurdish areas, with little regard for Kurdish authority or interests in the

disputed areas. KRG President Barzani has concluded that Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's recent actions in Khaneqin underscored his growing "arrogance," and that Maliki's intention is that Khaneqin be the first step in using force to undermine the rights of the KRG as provided under the Iraqi constitution. He believes that the GOI has no interest in cooperating with the KRG as an equal partner within a federal Iraq. KRG President Barzani stated that the only acceptable way to determine the status of the disputed areas is through the implementation of Article 140, and that until there is a constitutional resolution to this issue, no Iraqi army presence in the disputed areas would go unchallenged by a KRG Peshmerga presence. The idea that Khaneqin was only the first step by the GOI to encroach upon KRG autonomy was shared by the KRG Deputy Prime Minister Omar Fatah, who likened the current situation to a similar incident during the Iraq-Iran War, in which Saddam negotiated with the KRG to allow them to temporarily occupy Khaneqin due to its close proximity to the Iranian border, but then took it back and expelled Kurdish forces.

14. (C) On August 26, Senior PUK Politburo members Dr. Kamal Fuad and Omer Ali Said highlighted the continued counterterrorist cooperation between the KRG and GOI in Diyala and elsewhere, indicating that the KRG considered it a sacred mission to work with GOI and MNF-I on counterterrorism issues. The agreement between GOI and KRG to coordinate before Iraqi Army forces entered any problematic areas controlled by Peshmerga had been working well before Khaneqin. The recent Iraqi Army actions there were uncoordinated and provocative, with Iraqi forces attacking the governor's office in Diyala, killing his

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secretary and arresting other employees. While admitting that a small (but not significant) Al-Qaeda presence existed in Khaneqin, Kamal Fuad characterized the district as a normally safe area, and suggested that Prime Minister Maliki's move into the district had less to do with counterterrorism than to expel Kurds from the area. The GOI was seeking unilateral authority to expel Peshmerga forces from disputed areas, and this is "unacceptable." When the Peshmerga went to these areas, Fuad said, the GOI was informed and the purpose was to protect the areas. The Peshmerga presence had been positive and there had been no tension with any ethnic groups. The KRG was ready to cooperate to fight terror, but if the purpose was simply to expel Kurds, it would reject this; counterterrorism could not be the justification for the expulsion of Kurds from disputed areas. Fuad noted that the PUK and KDP leadership would continue to coordinate closely on Khaneqin, suggesting an unusual degree of party unity on this issue. Fuad said he hoped that relations between the KRG and the GOI would continue to develop positively and that the KRG hoped for no escalation in Khaneqin, but stressed the message that the KRG was prepared to defend its position militarily in Diyala if provoked.

15. (C) Governor of Sulaimaniyah Dana Majeed told us of Prime Minister Maliki's decision to remove Iraqi Army troops from around Khaneqin city and expressed hope that the move would go far toward avoiding further escalation. Majeed judged Maliki's original decision to deploy IA to Khaneqin as ill-conceived and criticized the Prime Minister for not having weighed the consequences of his actions. Majeed noted wrongly the political precedent being created in Khaneqin, suggesting that if demonstrations had proved to be a successful means of driving the Iraqi Army out of disputed areas, others would eventually follow suit. General Mahmud Singawi, Deputy Commander of the PUK Peshmerga and President Talabani's Peshmerga representative, claimed that the Iraqi Army was trying to destabilize Khaneqin, forcing a Peshmerga withdrawal that would then create a free hand in the area. General Mushen Bayuz, PUK Deputy Minister of Peshmerga Affairs, agreed that the action in Khaneqin was a concerning one that could lead to similar unilateral moves by Iraqi

forces in other disputed areas. Singawi had just returned from Khanqin before meeting with S/A Krajewski, having visited to try and help calm the situation. The KRG's goal, he said, was to avoid escalation and to avoid war. Public pressure, however, as a result of the unilateral Iraqi Army move into the district and the August 26 explosion in Jalalwa was mounting. All ethnic groups had participated in demonstrations rejecting the Iraqi Army occupation, Singawi said. People are afraid. If we do not support them, they may turn elsewhere.

KRG Officials Deeply Suspicious, Resentful of Maliki, Growing Power of Baghdad

16. (C) Both KRG President Masoud Barzani and KRG Intel Chief Masrur Barzani expressed fears about the KRG's increasing marginalization from key decisions concerning the future of Iraq. Masrur noted that the most important positions within the GOI have gone to friends of PM Maliki, while Kurds have been relegated to ineffectual positions outside of the circle of influence. On this point, he pointed out that all positions currently held by Kurds in the GOI are the result of alliances formed between the Kurds and other parties, and that we are only Iraqis when the GOI wants something from us, but we are Kurds and therefore separate from Iraq when we want to be treated as equal partners with the GOI and share in the administration of its government. In both meetings, they alleged double-standards in the treatment of the Kurds as compared with other minority populations in Iraq. Masrur highlighted Prime Minister Maliki's refusal to fulfill the promise that he made two years ago to create two entirely Kurdish divisions of the Iraqi Army as an example of discrimination against the Kurds, noting that PM Maliki has already created two completely Shi'a military divisions.

17. (C) Both the KRG President and the KRG Intel Chief voiced their strong opinion that Prime Minister Maliki was making unilateral decisions about the future of Iraq without consulting the KRG and other key players in the GOI. KRG President Barzani stated that, It must be understood that Maliki cannot exceed the rights given to him by the constitution, and that Maliki was behaving as a dictator, forgetting that the KRG had entered into a voluntary union with the GOI. The KRG President added that, should Maliki continue to take KRG support for granted, he would be forced to consider withdrawing the security support assets that the KRG already provides elsewhere in Iraq. S/A Krajewski responded by saying that this would cause relations

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between the GOI and the KRG to deteriorate further and would not serve the KRG's larger interests of, for the first time in history, creating a secure and internationally-recognized autonomous region for the Kurds. When Ambassador Krajewski suggested that KRG President Barzani voice his concerns directly to Prime Minister Maliki, the KRG President demurred, saying he is not boycotting Maliki. (Note: We learned later that Maliki had been refusing to take Masoud's calls, but that they finally spoke the night of August 29. End note)

Status of Kirkuk remains a charged issue and Article 140 remains a sticking point

18. (C) Beginning with a meeting with Deputy Speaker of the Kurdistan National Assembly Kemal Kirkuki, S/A Krajewski stated the USG position that the most equitable and realistic solution to Kirkuk is likely to come from the resident population of Kirkuk, not from Baghdad, the UN, or any other external entity. He also conveyed USG disappointment with the linkage of the Provincial Elections Law to the Kirkuk issue and expressed the USG hope that all parties involved in Kirkuk be amenable to compromise in order to facilitate

an equitable resolution in a timely fashion. He added that decentralization was good for democracy and ultimately, for formalizing the authority of the KRG, and that it was only through the passage of the Provincial Elections Law that decentralization could be codified. He noted the unique opportunity for the KRG to, for the first time in history, create an internationally-recognized autonomous region, and expressed the USG hope that the KRG would not allow the inability to compromise with the GOI on Kirkuk and other issues to prevent the KRG from benefiting from that opportunity.

¶9. (C) KNA and KRG interlocutors reiterated Kurdish support for the passage of the Provincial Elections Law, but also stated their position that the passage of the law should not come at the expense of Kurdish claims to Kirkuk. KNA Deputy Speaker Kerkuki, as well as KRG Deputy Prime Minister Omar Fatah and the governors of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah, spoke of the historical significance of Kirkuk to the KRG and repeated their staunch belief that implementation of Article 140 was the only acceptable, equitable and constitutional way to determine its political status and that of the other disputed areas that the KRG has effectively administered for the majority of its existence (including Khaneqin, Akre, Faiyda and Halabja.) KNA Deputy Speaker Kerkuki spoke negatively of the first round of UNAMI recommendations on disputed areas. He also said that he and others were increasingly concerned that the GOI was becoming more hostile towards the KRG, that the GOI's actions regarding Kirkuk and Khaneqin were indicative of their desire to isolate the Kurds and begin encroaching on their hard-won territory and power. (Comment: Rhetorically, Kurdish officials move quickly from complaints about Baghdad's growing power to expressions of fear that Kurds will be targeted for extinction. In these conversations, S/A acknowledged Kurdish fears but disputed the characterization of Maliki as just another Saddam. End Comment) To varying degrees, the Deputy Speaker's views were shared by other KRG officials, including KRG Deputy Prime Minister Fatah. Fatah made it very clear that it was not in the interest of any KRG official to recommend any alternative to Kirkuk being a part of the KRG, saying that anyone who did so would be accused of treason.⁸ Both KNA Deputy Speaker and KRG Deputy Prime Minister alluded to the possibility that the people of the Kurdistan Region would rise up⁸ if Kirkuk were separated from the KRG, and that they (the KRG leadership) would be unable to control them.

¶10. (C) Former PUK Deputy Secretary General and now reformist outsider and media mogul Nashirwan Mustafa went further in an August 26 meeting, saying that Kirkuk had long ago become an emotional issue. He said, &We fought for eight years in the name of Kirkuk,⁸ but also said that the Kurdish parties are cynically taking advantage of Kirkuk as a diversion to draw attention away from their own inability to provide basic services and improved infrastructure. The recent low voter registration turnout was a protest, he said, against an ineffectual KRG leadership.

Relations with bordering countries

¶11. (C) On the issue of Iran's activities in the region, Nashirwan Mustafa indicated his belief that Iran was playing a long and calculated game, using its wealth and links to the Shi'a, in the south of Iraq to expand its influence in the country. The nuclear issue was a matter of dignity for the Iranians, he said, and urged the USG to continue its dialogue and pressure in place of any military action against Iran.

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Governor Majeed, who was PUK representative in Iran from 2000-2003, offered his view that Iran was moving slowly and quietly, having cultivated public Shi'a support in Iraq through provision of services and through support of Shi'a holy sites in Najaf and Karbala. Majeed believed that Iran was attempting the same type of influence in Kurdistan.

Iran, he said, could become "like the USSR" if it was allowed to complete its nuclear program, and Iraq would be "among the first to surrender." Majeed urged the USG to continue investment in Iraq,s security and economic viability as effective checks on Iran,s rising influence and power in the region.

Religious minorities find safety, sympathy in the KRG, but are concerned about the future

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¶12. (U) In various meetings with representatives of the Assyrian and Yezidi communities, S/A Krajieski affirmed the USG commitment to the security, economic development, and political inclusion of the Christian and other religious minority communities of Iraq. Representatives confirmed the accommodations made for them within the KRG and called themselves fortunate, relative to their co-religionists in the rest of Iraq. That view was reinforced by the Governor of Dohuk Province, Tamer Ramadan, who provided information about the resources that the province has committed to facilitate the return of religious minorities to their ancestral homelands within Dohuk Province. However, both the Yezidi and Assyrian groups expressed grave concern for the safety of those members of their communities who do not live within the KRG. In addition, the Assyrian community expressed concern about their ability to protect their interests, even within the KRG, without some form of formalized political autonomy. The self-selected spokesman of the Assyrian community, KRG Minister of Finance Sarkis Mamendu, openly stated the community,s intention to pursue formalized political autonomy. He expressed his belief that, were he not in the position of leadership that he currently occupies, no one in the KRG would be able or willing to protect the advances towards self-determination that the community has already made. When pressed for details on the exact nature of the autonomous-yet-integrated relationship the Assyrians sought with the KRG or with the GOI, KRG Minister of Finance was unable to provide specifics. S/A Krajieski responded by saying that the decision on whether to create an autonomous Assyrian entity would be for Iraqis to make, not the USG, but that it would be politically controversial. He said the USG interest is in protecting minority groups, whatever political jurisdiction they fall under.

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